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SIPDIS

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STATE FOR G; CA/OCS/ACS/EAP; EAP/EX; EAP/BCLTV; EAP/EP; INR;
OES/STC (PBATES); OES/IHA (DSINGER AND NCOMELLA)
BANGKOK FOR RMO, CDC, USAID/RDM/A (MFRIEDMAN AND JMACARTHUR)
USDA FOR FAS/PASS TO APHIS
DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE FOR OSD/ISA/AP (LSTERN)
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STATE PASS USTR (ELENA BRYAN)
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SUBJECT: VIETNAM: AVIAN INFLUENZA WEEKLY REPORT FOR DECEMBER
14, 2005

REF: HANOI 3240

1. (SBU) Summary. There have been no new human Avian Influenza (AI) cases. The number of active AI-affected areas decreased from 166 communes in 17 provinces to 126 communes in 15 provinces over the past two weeks, with no new reported outbreaks in poultry during the past week. The Government of Vietnam (GVN) believes the sources of AI in poultry are endemic and not spread (in Vietnam) by wild bird flocks. The ban on sale of live poultry in urban areas is having a profound negative impact on the livelihoods of small-scale farmers. End Summary.

No New Confirmed AI Human Fatalities

2. (U) There have been no new confirmed AI human fatalities since the October 29 death of a Hanoi man reported previously. Mission has confirmed through Deputy Director Nguyen Bich Le of the Can Tho Health Department that a boy from southern Hau Giang Province that died on December 12 tested AI-negative by the Pasteur Institute in HCMC. We have been unable to gather further information on the three-year-old boy from southern Tien Giang Province, reported previously, who was awaiting confirmation test results.

Number of Active Poultry Outbreak Areas Decreases

3. (U) The number of active AI-affected areas has decreased from 166 communes in 17 provinces to 126 communes in 15 provinces over the past two weeks, with no new reported outbreaks during the last week. This is down from a peak of 23 provinces. Fourteen of the current outbreak provinces are in northern Vietnam and one is in central Vietnam.

Duck, Duck, Goose!

4. (U) At a periodic donor update meeting held December 13, Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) Cao Duc Phat expressed strong concern about ducks, which he labeled "the reservoirs of the (H5N1) virus," because they have high incidence of H5N1 yet remain asymptomatic. Furthermore, he stated that the GVN believes the sources of AI in poultry are endemic and not spread (in Vietnam) by wild bird flocks. In northern Vietnam, domesticated waterfowl are predominantly reared freely in canals and rice fields.

5. (U) With regard to an earlier press article stating that Deputy Prime Minister Pham Gia Khiem signed off on a proposal on December 8 to "kill all 62 million waterfowl across the country," (Reftel) Post has learned that MARD has a plan to prohibit hatching waterfowl (30-45 days old), to cull free-ranging ducks that have tested AI-positive and to send AI-negative ducks to qualified slaughtering houses for human consumption. The total number of waterfowl is less than one quarter of the entire poultry flock (62 million waterfowl of 220 million poultry).

6. (U) Since the latest wave of AI outbreaks began in early October 2005, 3.5 million birds have been destroyed, including birds culled in cities due to the ban on live poultry in urban areas.

Small Farmers Getting Slammed by Poultry Ban in Cities

7. (SBU) Senior GVN officials including Minister Phat, international donors and non-governmental organizations have expressed strong concern about the impact the ban on sale of live poultry in urban areas is having on the livelihoods of small-scale farmers. Farmers are being compensated about one-fifth of the full value for their culled poultry while there is no market in the urban areas for live and

vaccinated poultry, eggs and other poultry products (e.g. feather dusters). Moreover, flocks that are not sent to market must be fed at home. As predominantly poor agrarian households find it increasingly difficult to make ends meet, flocks are left to starve and farmers sink closer toward or further into poverty.

18. (SBU) Post believes the rationale for GVN to close the "wet markets" is their way of decreasing the number of small, household flocks. The GVN seeks to send all poultry to controlled slaughterhouses only. The ban on the sale of live poultry in wet markets will discourage smaller growers not associated with plants from growing birds. An additional positive impact of the ban is that fewer animal health extensionists will be needed in the medium and long-term to train small farmers. Again, how poorer, small-scale farmers will react to these market pressures is unknown, but the international donor community is concerned. [NOTE: Emergency relief for this economic disaster may need to be considered. END NOTE]

Can Vietnam Produce AI Vaccines for Humans and Animals?

19. (SBU) Knowledge about GVN's specific plans for the development of a human AI vaccine is still limited. In the beginning of 2005, the National Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology (NIHE) was assigned the task of developing a human H5N1 vaccine. NIHE worked with scientists at Tokyo University to develop the vaccine seed strain virus and selected primary monkey kidney cells as the culture medium. According to a November 26 article in Nhan Dan newspaper, a scientific committee assembled by the Ministry of Science and Technology recommended to the Office of the Government that NIHE should not be permitted to proceed to clinical trials with their vaccine, citing concerns about the origin of the seed strain virus and the safety of primary monkey kidney cells for use in human vaccines. Representatives of the World Health Organization (WHO) have confirmed this, but noted that NIHE was permitted to proceed if they met all of the recommendations made by WHO vaccine experts, which has not yet happened.

110. (SBU) Regarding the GVN's efforts to develop an animal AI vaccine, the Institute of Biotechnology (IBT) at the Vietnamese Academy of Science and Technology has developed a prototype veterinary AI vaccine from a WHO-approved seed strain virus. The Director of IBT noted that the institute is currently conducting small-scale clinical trials in rats and poultry using three dose levels and indicated that the results at three weeks post inoculation are promising.

111. (SBU) MARD's NAVETCO, the largest producer of animal medicines and vaccines in Vietnam, has partnered with IBT to produce sufficient vaccine for full clinical trials. NAVETCO has expressed interest in developing the technology to use pathogen-free eggs as the culture medium, in which they claim the virus grows very well. Such eggs are imported at prices ranging from USD 4 to 25 per egg. Two key impediments to GVN's plans to produce enough poultry vaccine for the country's needs are a lack of technology in Vietnam to produce pathogen-free eggs and insufficient capital to build a proper vaccine production facility. GVN's efforts to conduct a nationwide poultry vaccination campaign have been hampered by unsteady supplies of the animal vaccine, which is imported from China, and unspecified issues related to quality control.

Brother, How Art Thou?

112. (U) An informal survey conducted by local Embassy staff indicates that Vietnamese people do not think AI is a major threat at this time and as long as the virus has not yet transmitted from human to human. However, respondents all have a vigilant attitude towards eating chicken meat. A quick walk around Hanoi reinforced this observation. Shops that formerly sold chicken, duck and goose noodle soup (a favorite traditional food in Hanoi) have either closed or been transformed into other lines of business.

113. (U) Although the GVN has mobilized an information campaign (posters, public announcements, news) to educate the Vietnamese about AI, many people have not prepared themselves for an epidemic scenario and do not know what they will do if and when an AI pandemic occurs. "Let fate decide" and "We just cannot do anything" are two commonly held beliefs among the Vietnamese people. Unlike many expatriates, most Vietnamese in Hanoi have not stockpiled Tamiflu for their families despite street prices as low as USD 35 per 10-tablet dose.

114. (U) Not surprisingly, awareness levels about AI in rural areas are worse. Informal discussions with contacts in Ha Tay Province (50 km from Hanoi) and Hoa Binh Province (70 km from Hanoi) indicate that farmers do not care much

about the pandemic as they have many other difficulties to cope with. Many households do not kill their chickens, ducks and geese, as these animals are relatively high-value and a significant household resource to them. For some people in rural areas, historically low prices for poultry meat (about USD 0.30 per duck/goose) provides a new luxury for rice bowls that previously were meatless and lacked adequate protein.

MARINE